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Influence in the Face of Changing Interests: U.S.–Iranian Relations 1953-2020

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Abstract

Despite American presidential rhetoric extolling the virtues of establishing democracy in Iran, there has been strong evidence to prove that this has not been the true intent of the United States' foreign policy in the region. Rather, since 1953, the United States' primary goal in Iran has been to maintain a regime and environment that is favorable to the facilitation of American interests regardless of the regime type. While these American interests have ranged from oil settlements, the repulsion of communism, containment of revolutionary sentiment, and others, the basal objective has remained the same throughout the period of 1953 to the present. While the 1979 Iranian Revolution proved to be a disruption to the United States' ability to maintain their interests in the region, this paper will argue that the event did not signify a significant shift in the United States' overarching policy of maintaining influence in Iran from the pre- to post-revolutionary period.

1. Introduction

America is currently standing at the precipice of its relationship with Iran. On January 3, 2020, Iranian general Qasem Soleimani was killed via an airstrike, assassinated by the United States. This was a landmark interaction between the two countries. As the United States and Iran hung on the brink of war, the world waited to see what the out-

come would be after the U.S.'s blatant attack on Iranian leadership. Popular opinion in the U.S. was divided, with some believing that the killing of Soleimani was necessary retribution for his past action and others worrying that it would disrupt the already fragile nature of U.S.-Iranian relations. It is in the aftermath of this attack, amid global uncertainty, that I decided to write my thesis on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations. Importantly, the killing of Qasem Soleimani was not isolated from the past. It reflected a long-standing pattern of U.S. intervention within the country, propelled by a multitude of reasons. By beginning with the 1953 Coup d'état in Iran, one can see the patterns of U.S. action in subsequent watershed incidents within Iran and between the two countries.

2. The 1953 Coup: Origins

The 1953 coup d'état and overthrow of democratically elected Mohammed Mossadegh and the subsequent consolidation of power by Mohammad Reza Shah demonstrates the initiation of the United States' broader policy of American influence in the region. The event also shows how the establishment of a regime favorable to America helped facilitate American foreign policy interests of the era such as the repulsion of communism and favorable oil settlements. As declassified documents and public statements through presidential press releases and newspapers will show, while overt action and rhetoric are important for understanding the public's reactions towards certain events, covert documents and action

will demonstrate the true intention of the United States regarding the 1953 Coup and the subsequent events the U.S. directly caused and influenced within Iran.

As the 1953 Coup was unfolding, it was not immediately evident that foreign powers, such as the United States and Great Britain, had an integral role in the overthrow. However, in the subsequent days and weeks afterwards, the involvement of the United States was difficult to deny. In a declassified, internal Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document it explains, “enough talkative people, including many Iranians were privy to segments of the operation to make it relatively easy for journalists to reconstruct the coup.”¹ The United States was also identified as an instrument in the coup by the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* which wrote in 1953 that the “United States intrigues and finances had lain behind earlier stages of the Shah’s coup.”² The United States did not acknowledge their role in the 1953 Coup until much later when the CIA released further documents on the event in 2013.³ However, it was common knowledge in Iran that the U.S. had a part in the overthrow of Mossadegh. Not only would this mutual understanding among the Iranian public foment anti-American sentiment, it would also taint the Pahlavi government as colluders with foreign influences within the country.

The takeaway from the 1953 Coup is more nuanced than the United States simply acting on their own accord to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh. The operation was not only planned alongside and aided by Great Britain’s MI6, but also by Iranian parties with their own motivations for Mossadegh’s removal. For the United States to infiltrate and overthrow Mossadegh there neces-

sitated collaborators within Iranian society. Religious leaders known as the ulama, Iranian press, politicians, and others who would also benefit from the plan aided in the CIA’s mission. Dr. Donald Wilber’s *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, a declassified CIA history outlining the coup, serves as a roadmap for understanding internal collaboration that assisted in the ousting of Mossadegh. Alongside the United States’ intense propaganda campaign, directed through the Iranian press by the CIA Art Group, the agency’s Tehran station was also “authorized to spend one million rials a week in purchasing the cooperation of members of the Iranian Majlis.”⁴ The ulama were also motivated to act against Mossadegh, who had sought to reduce their power throughout his tenure as Prime Minister. The document also notes how religious leaders, such as Ayatollah Boroujerdi, were motivated by the operation to make a “pro-Shah statement,” to increase favorable sentiment towards him.⁵ Thus, the United States and Great Britain worked alongside multiple groups in Iranian society who were also motivated, be it through political, religious, or economic reasons, to oust Mossadegh.

3. The 1953 Coup: American Interests

The United States’ motivations for the overthrow of Mossadegh differed from those of the internal, Iranian collaborators. Most scholars take a two-pronged approach when understanding the motivations of the United States in the 1953 Coup.⁶ First, there is the argument that the United States intervened to repel communism from the country as they viewed an encroaching Tudeh party as a threat to their regional economic interests and as a quasi-insurgency group backed

¹Central Intelligence Agency, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952-August 1953*, Donald Wilber. The National Security Archive, 1954, 26.

²“Moscow Says U.S. Aided Shah’s Coup,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1953.

³Malcolm Byrne, “CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup,” The National Security Archive, August 19, 2013.

⁴Central Intelligence Agency, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, 19-20.

⁵Central Intelligence Agency, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, 65-66.

⁶Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 5.

by the Soviets. In addition, the U.S. saw the growing possibility of the Soviets gaining influence with the Mossadegh government. A declassified CIA document states, "Tudeh support for the Prime Minister indicates that the Communists consider that his return to power will best promote their objectives."⁷ The United States viewed Iran as a struggle between themselves and the Soviet Union in the broader fight of the Cold War. To gain Iran as an ally for either side would mean a greater foothold in the Middle East, which was increasingly becoming a hotbed for proxy wars between the two nations. The Tudeh party served as the primary, organized communist threat in the region and their support of Mossadegh worried U.S. officials to a great extent.

Only days before the August 1953 Coup occurred, the *New York Times* reported on Eisenhower's and the United States' intent on blocking communism within the country. This motivation was known in Iran, whose own citizens and journalists had been aware of the United States' interests within the region. In July 1953 the article stated, "Non-communist editorials accused Mr. Eisenhower of supporting British imperial interests."⁸ A noticeable shift in American policy towards Iran occurred in a flurry of meetings in the days before the coup. The same Times article highlighted how the Tudeh party, "insisted on attributing sinister motives to the visit" despite American statements to the contrary.⁹

The other concern which prompted the United States to intervene in Iran was over oil settlements in the region. This concern is highlighted in a declassified State Department document from 1952 which outlines how the British requested aid from the United States to overthrow the Mossadegh government, citing their grim outlook on reaching

a favorable oil settlement with the Prime Minister.¹⁰ In addition, the United States had also been shaken by the growing oil nationalization in Latin American countries and sought to prevent a similar occurrence in Iran.¹¹ Initially the United States rejected the British government's request and decided to continue trying to settle the oil dispute with Mossadegh.¹² However, with the promise of increased influence in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by helping the British, the Americans were further incentivized to accept the offer for covert intervention alongside the British. Eventually, they agreed to help orchestrate the coup against Mossadegh.

Retrospectively, in 1954, Eisenhower spoke about the Iranian coup a year after its toppling of the Mossadegh government. "We were faced in Iran with a situation that was highly dangerous to the world."¹³ He also stated that "the situation in Iran 'greatly ameliorated' as a result of the agreement between that nation's Government and the foreign oil companies."¹⁴ It is evident that the status of oil and economics in the Middle East was invariably linked to the American government's interest in repelling communism within the region. The Soviet Union had historically been embroiled in the oil conflict with Great Britain. The Cold War served to exacerbate the contentious nature of the two countries' relationship within Iran. The goal of anti-communism is also mentioned specifically in the British request for U.S. aid for the coup.¹⁵ By backing the British in the struggle for economic hegemony in the region, the United

¹⁰Department of State, *Proposal to Organize a Coup d'etat in Iran*, Byroade, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 1952, 2.

¹¹Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 79.

¹²Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 147.

¹³Joseph Loftus, "Eisenhower Bars Preventive War; Hopeful on Peace," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1954, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁴Loftus, "Eisenhower Bars Preventive War; Hopeful on Peace."

¹⁵Department of State, *Proposal to Organize a Coup d'etat in Iran*, 2.

⁷Central Intelligence Agency, *The Iranian Situation*, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 1953, 3.

⁸"Eisenhower Draws Fire of Iran Press," *The New York Times*, August 9, 1953, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁹"Eisenhower Draws Fire of Iran Press."

States was not only aiding their ally and repelling communism, but also laying a foundation of pro-West and inherently pro-capitalist sentiment.

So, the overthrow serviced American foreign policy in two key interests, in addition to beginning the trend of overarching American influence within Iran. Following the nationalization of oil in the region, the United States was offered the opportunity to directly intervene in Iranian politics through their operation alongside MI6 and Iranian collaborators. Following their orchestration of the 1953 coup in Iran, the United States became the primary foreign influence in the country. This allowed them to begin exercising policy goals which began in the forms of economic and political interests. Economically, the United States sought to destroy the goal of Iranian oil nationalization and gain influence in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Politically, the United States wished to suppress communist sentiment within the country as part of their larger part in the Cold War.

4. Post-Coup: The Shah and the U.S.

In the years post-coup, it would become increasingly apparent that the United States would prioritize the aid of whatever form of government that would best facilitate their interests in the region. Evidently, despite Eisenhower's earlier rejection of Mossadegh's request for economic support shortly before the 1953 Coup, he later accepted Prime Minister Zahedi's outreach.¹⁶ This demonstrates the stark difference between the United States' relations between Mossadegh and Zahedi. Clearly, the United States was more withholding to Mossadegh, who had served as a roadblock for the pursuance of U.S. interests in Iran. In contrast, Zahedi had been installed, in part, by the United States as a Prime Minister who would aid in the facilitation of American interests. In the

¹⁶"Iran Seems Stunned by Eisenhower Note," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1953, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Also see Anthony Leviero, "President Pledges Emergency Relief to Iranian Premier," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1953.

years following the 1953 coup, this pattern would become increasingly apparent in the U.S.'s interactions with the Shah.

In the period following the overthrow of Mossadegh, the United States worked to shape the Iranian government into one that supported American involvement within the country. One can analyze the interactions between Mohammad Reza Shah and U.S. government officials as evidence for the United States' motivation. As David Collier explains, "The United States supported and funded the shah's efforts to centralize power and took action to protect his reign from other possible threats."¹⁷ In moments where the Shah tried to subvert U.S. interests and either ignore attempted policy reform pushes by U.S. government officials or enter into talks with the Soviet Union, the United States pulled back on their demands of the Shah.¹⁸ Through the interactions between the Shah and the United States, one can analyze how the priority of the United States lay in the maintenance of the Pahlavi government, prioritizing a regime that would create a favorable environment for U.S. influence rather than one that would promote democracy.

One of the most striking examples of how the United States enabled Mohammad Reza Shah's continued leadership in Iran is the CIA-assisted creation and facilitation of the SAVAK. The SAVAK served as the secret police for the Shah, arresting and executing dissenters that tried to foment revolution against his regime. The United States, motivated to maintain the Shah's power and presence in Iran, had aided in its creation. As Collier explains, "American specialists trained virtually the entire first generation of recruits, who effectively and mercilessly restricted all forms of internal opposition."¹⁹ The part that the CIA

¹⁷David R. Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran, 1941-1979*, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 154.

¹⁸Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran*, 177.

¹⁹Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran*, 177.

played in the SAVAK demonstrates a clear disregard for democracy in the country in favor of consolidating the power of the Shah. The SAVAK served an important role in the maintenance of American interests in the region, enforcing stability by quashing dissent as well as suppressing communism by eliminating members of the Tudeh party. While this damaged the reputation of Americans from the view of Iranian citizens, it served to strengthen the trust between the Shah and America.

With the support of and assistance from the United States government, the Shah worked towards implementing policies that would further facilitate the actions of the United States within Iran. However, the intent of American foreign policy was aimed towards the repulsion of communism and oil settlements rather than the spread of democracy. Maintaining influence in Iran also secured the United States important access to the Persian Gulf, important both economically and militarily. The United States vied for authoritarian stability rather than veritable democracy as an unstable Iran would have inhibited the U.S. from pursuing its goals within the country. Regarding oil interests, the Shah had paved the way for American companies to take over the oil market.²⁰ In response, \$400 million in aid was sent by 1956 from the United States to Iran.²¹

Granted, there were shortcomings with some failures to fully implement U.S. policy and initiatives in Iran on the part of the Shah. As the Shah continued to consolidate his own power, Collier explains, “the shah ensured that all dissatisfaction focused on him.”²² However, the United States government continued to back him, seeing no other candidate or possibility to improve their

influence or status within the region. Understanding the 1953 Coup d’état and the resulting actions of both the United States and the Iranian governments can serve as a contributing factor to the occurrence of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Paving the way for the revolution was also growing anger and distrust towards the Pahlavi Dynasty. The United States’ intervention within the region and the government were also important factors contributing to the 1979 revolution as their status as the leading foreign influence in Iran increased the public’s anger towards the Shah. The governmental interference by the United States, as well as centuries of meddlesomeness from Great Britain and Russia, culminated in an environment of disdain towards the presence of foreign powers in the region.

5. The 1979 Revolution: Rebellion Against Foreign Intervention

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was initially untethered to a religious cause. The revolution served as a call-to-arms for many unique groups across the country from students to communists to women and more. It was aimed at the evident U.S. influence within the Pahlavi regime and Iran overall. Ruhollah Khomeini quickly rose as the leading opposition to the Shah, fomenting nationalist sentiment within the population that took a direct attack to foreign influence, particularly in regard to the United States. He saw himself as a “vanguard” of the “universal class” and promoted a widespread message that served as a call to arms for many different groups of people.²³ This push against the United States by Khomeini’s populist uprising served as the most outward rejection of American influence within Iran. While interactions with the Shah had not always gone according to U.S. interests, the Pahlavi Dynasty was the United States’ best option for influence in the

ence in Iran, 161.

²⁰Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran*, 157.

²¹Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran*, 157.

²²Collier, *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran*, 165.

²³Maryam Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution* (Pluto Press, 2007), 50.

country. The 1979 Revolution disrupted this influence and pushed the United States to evaluate its strategy for the region.

In the public sphere, the United States made apparent its condemnation of the revolution. U.S. officials were both upset by the anti-American nature of the revolution, as well as its religious rhetoric that set the new Khomeini regime as antithetical to the heralded Christian values of America. In a more economic sense, Americans were also concerned by unrest in the country disrupting American business interests and oil production. A 1978 New York Times article writes, "The upheaval has already meant the loss of billions of dollars in military orders, property damage and delayed payments and has caused worries about loans made by American banks."²⁴ While the early stages of the revolution certainly interfered with the success of American foreign policy in the region, the most public and concerning event for U.S. officials was yet to come.

6. The Iranian Hostage Crisis

On November 4, 1979 an Iranian student group, the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, infiltrated the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took American embassy staff hostage.²⁵ With support from Ayatollah Khomeini, they demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran from the United States.²⁶ This event sparked a stark change in rhetoric regarding the U.S.'s opinion on the revolution. While mostly quiet about the early stages of the event, President Jimmy Carter was quick to react publicly to the hostage situation. Occurring from November 4,

1979 to January 20, 1981, this 444-day event further sparked outrage from America.²⁷ Just two days after the event began, President Jimmy Carter wrote personally to Ayatollah Khomeini to ask for the release of the U.S. hostages. He further wrote, "The people of the United States desire to have relations with Iran based upon equality, mutual respect, and friendship."²⁸ The message from the Iranian student group who orchestrated the hostage crisis was clear, however, that they disagreed with Carter's outlook on the U.S.-Iranian relations, for the past, present, and future. The group, known as the Followers of the Imam's Line, responded to the meetings between American diplomats and the revolutionary Iranian government with a radio broadcast stating, "Can we forget all the U.S. agents who've been the worst kind of criminals and now they send these dirty characters?"²⁹ The hostage crisis demonstrated that U.S. relations with the Iranian people had substantially degraded over the past decade, stemming from the 1953 Coup and the resulting growing distrust of foreign powers in the country.

The Iran hostage crisis had an indisputably negative affect on U.S. domestic policy, specifically in the 1980 presidential election. As the hostage crisis stretched on through the final years of Carter's presidency, it weighed heavily on his reelection chances. Interestingly, after the November election, religious leader Hojat ul-Islam Asghar Mousavi Khomeini was quoted as saying, "We would have reached a solution earlier if Carter, who was already in power, had been elected...With Reagan's victory, this will need a long time."³⁰ Despite the fact that Iran publicly held a stance wavering between apathy and annoyance at the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the

²⁴Ann Crittenden, "Iran Unrest a Nightmare For Many U.S. Concerns: Other Major Arms Deals Dropped Turmoil in Iran Hurts U.S. Companies Problems for Smaller Companies," *The New York Times*, 1978.

²⁵"Significant Dates in the Hostage Crisis," *The New York Times*, 1981.

²⁶"Teheran Students Seize U.S. Embassy and Hold Hostages," *The New York Times*, November 5, 1979, sec. Archives.

²⁷"Significant Dates in the Hostage Crisis."

²⁸Jimmy Carter, "Letter from Jimmy Carter to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Regarding the Release of the Iranian Hostages," November 6, 1979, National Archives.

²⁹John Kifner, "Iran Demands Shah," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1979, sec. Archives.

³⁰"Iran Says Reagan Victory Prolongs Hostage Crisis," *The New York Times*, 1980.

hostage crisis came to a sudden end as he was being sworn into office. In a show of protest against Jimmy Carter, who had long negotiated with the hostage takers and confronted Iran about human rights abuses, the hostages had been released symbolically the moment Carter was no longer president. In fact, senior U.S. politicians agreed that the prolonged and unresolved nature of the crisis had resulted in the loss of Jimmy Carter.³¹ Together, the 1979 Revolution as well as the hostage crisis sent a wave of disruption to U.S. foreign policy, as it was tied domestically to the presidential election as well as on-the-ground in Iran.

7. Post-1979 Revolution: American Policy Disturbance

Despite the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis creating major tensions between the two nations, it only served as a disturbance for the United States' overall mission of maintaining influence in the region. In fact, in President Jimmy Carter's 1980 State of the Union address, he reiterated the importance of the Persian Gulf region in American policy and interests. He said, "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America."³² The United States still managed to shape politics and the economy within Iran. This is not to say that the United States saw the Khomeini regime as the ideal situation to facilitate their foreign policy agenda within the country.

Khomeini's pan-Islamic, anti-imperialist rhetoric and ideology of exporting the revolution also served to threaten the U.S.'s ability to maintain influence. A declassified 1980 CIA document explains, "Iran's efforts to export its

revolution are a threat to key US interests... Iranian-supported unrest could lead to sabotage and strikes by oil workers, since Shias inhabit many of the oil-producing areas of the Persian Gulf states."³³ The impact of this statement is two-fold. First, that the United States needed to seek a way to suppress the influence of Iranian Revolution on neighboring states. Secondly, a key goal of U.S. influence remained maintaining a position in the Persian Gulf that would be economically beneficial in regard to the oil industry. Although the nature of their interests in Iran was shifting, the United States sought to maintain influence through the destabilization of Iranian hegemony. In response to the hostage crisis, the United States had begun implementing a system of sanctions against the country to try and exert economic pressure and coercion for release of the hostages.³⁴ These sanctions would serve as the basis of economic influence over Iran that would persist into the twenty-first century. However, the United States did not stop at sanctions in the post-Revolutionary period and turned to more drastic measures in an effort to contain the unrest that had been fomented in Iran, as Panah explains. In addition, there was an effort to regain influence in the region through resetting the balance of power.

8. Regional Disruption: U.S. Policy and the Iran-Iraq War

The United States more aggressively disrupted geo-politics in the region through their instigation and aid in prolonging the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). While the United States cannot be wholly targeted as the sole reason for the outbreak of the war, an analysis of weapons trading, regional political moves, and covert action reveals that the U.S. played a major role in the conflict. In ad-

³¹"Carter Aide Ties Defeat To Hostage Crisis in Iran," *The New York Times*, 1980.

³²Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union Before a Joint Session of Congress" (Speech, Joint Session of Congress, Washington D.C., January 23, 1980).

³³National Foreign Assessment Center, *Iran: Exporting the Revolution*, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 1980, iii.

³⁴Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World*, 76.

dition, to realign its influence within Iran, the U.S. turned to regional destabilization through the instigation of groups opposed to the revolution. A *Washington Post* article reported on missions to damage the image of Khomeini, "One was designed to gather intelligence about Iran and support Iranian exiles."³⁵ In the post-Revolutionary period, the United States took a covert, but aggressive stance against the Iranian government and sought to damage its image and influence through covert missions not only in Iran, but also throughout the Middle East. Thus, even prior to the Iran-Iraq War and the Iran-Contra affair, the United States worked tirelessly to influence the nature of politics in Iran. The affair was just one part of a larger seven-year mission to gain favor with different aspects of Iranian government.³⁶ One specific instance even reflected the United States' goal of communist repulsion within Iran wherein the CIA released the names of KGB agents in Iran to the Khomeini regime, resulting in the deaths of around 200 people.³⁷ This indicates that despite the 1979 Revolution disrupting their immediate ability to continue exerting influence in Iran to pursue their foreign policy goals and protect their interests, the United States was quickly able to regain the ability to affect the communist agenda within Iran despite the disruption. In addition, although the United States was opposed to Khomeini's regime, it would play into its anti-Communist nature to ensure that the U.S.'s own foreign policy goals were met.

Simultaneous to maintaining influence within Iran, as the previously mentioned CIA document referred to, a key goal in U.S. foreign policy regarding Iran became the containment of revolutionary sentiment. Khomeini had made clear his hope to export the revolution into nearby Middle

Eastern states through a policy of pan-Islamism. The sincerity of Khomeini's intentions, however, were questioned and other rulers in the Middle East feared that this sentiment would lead to the demise of their regime. His rhetoric, "alarmed the leaders of the Arab states, who feared for the security of their own regimes."³⁸ To prevent the spread of revolutionary sentiment, the United States began a period of what Maryam Panah refers to as *rapprochement* with Iraq in the late 1970s in an effort to not only reset the balance of power within the region, but also in an effort to end the hostage crisis post-1979.³⁹ As tensions grew between Iraq and Iran due to historical religious conflict as well as territorial disputes, the United States facilitated the sale of engines and jets to Iraq all while acknowledging the strong probability of a war between the two nations.⁴⁰

9. American Policy Exposed: The Iran-Contra Affair

After growing tensions between the two countries erupted in 1980, resulting in what would become a nearly decade-long military conflict, the United States continued to support Iraq covertly through weapons sales to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.⁴¹ However, in an effort to destabilize the region the United States was also involved in selling weapons parts to Iran through an Israeli proxy to fund the US-supported Contras in Nicaragua, in what later would become known as the Iran-Contra affair.⁴² In a 1992 *New York Times* article a State Department official was quoted in regard

³⁸William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, vol. Fifth edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), 360.

³⁹Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World*, 79.

⁴⁰Panah, *The Islamic Republic and the World*, 80. Also see Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 431-432.

⁴¹Seymour Hersh, "U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran," *The New York Times*, January 26, 1992, The New York Times Archive.

⁴²Hersh, "U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran."

³⁵Bob Woodward, "CIA Curried Favor With Khomeini, Exiles," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1986, 2.

³⁶Woodward, "CIA Curried Favor With Khomeini, Exiles," 1.

³⁷Woodward, "CIA Curried Favor With Khomeini, Exiles," 2.

to the regional weapons trading as saying, “We wanted to avoid victory by both sides.”⁴³

The Iran-Contra affair was an example that demonstrated the United States’ mission to hold influence in Iran in the form of arms dealing and regional destabilization. While the rhetoric maintained outwardly by American President Ronald Reagan condemned Iran and supported Iraq in the conflict, the covert actions revealed that the United States had also been supporting Iran through illicit weapons trading that violated previously enacted embargoes and restrictions against the country. This further serves as evidence that through covert weapons trading to both nations, the intent of the United States was to continually destabilize the region in an effort to suppress hegemonic power by Iraq and Iran. With both countries weakened, the United States would be able to possess greater influence over oil in the region as well as contain revolutionary sentiment from spreading outside of Iran.

Spearheaded by the National Security Council and the CIA, what was first referred to as the Iran Initiative began in 1985 and first was targeted at intelligence collection.⁴⁴ The mission then successively used Israel as a go-between for missile transport to Iran and used the subsequent profits to fund the Contras in Nicaragua.⁴⁵ The Iran Initiative missions took place despite the fact that Iran had been subject to embargoes and sanctions by the United States which should have prohibited this action. An explanation for the Iran Initiative and weapons trading despite public rhetoric against Iran can be tied to multiple causes. First and foremost, as a direct explanation to the reasons behind the weapons dealing, the U.S. government pointed towards the hostage crisis occurring

in Lebanon at the time, which was thought to have been potentially connected to Iran.⁴⁶

However, more revealing are the National Security Decision Directives (NSDDs) outlined in the *Report of the President’s Special Review Board* that list the key U.S. interests in Iran. The 1987 list mainly focuses on repelling communism, securing economic/oil security through land and political stability, as well as improving the human rights situation in Iran. Notably mentioned are the goals of: “preserving Iran as an independent buffer between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf,” “An early end to the Iran-Iraq war without Soviet mediation or change in the regional balance of power,” and “Movement toward the normalization of Iranian-American relations.”⁴⁷ There was a clear opposition of opinions with whether the illicit sale of arms to Iran would truly further U.S. interests. Early on, communiques between Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense at the time, and Robert McFarlane, the National Security Advisor during the Iran-Contra deals, reveal Weinberger’s disagreement with the plan. He wrote that the arms sales would lead to “a possible alteration of the strategic balance in favor of Iran.”⁴⁸ However, the Director of Central Intelligence made clear his approval of the plan by writing that the plan would, “enhance U.S. leverage in order to ensure that the USSR is not the primary beneficiary of change and turmoil in this critical country.”⁴⁹

The dialogues between various departments and key figures within the Reagan administration reveal the disagreement in how to best preserve and pursue U.S. leverage and influence in Iran. While some, such as Weinberger, viewed the plan as unwise and a disruption of the balance of power,

⁴³Hersh, “U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran.”

⁴⁴Central Intelligence Agency, *Statement of William H. Webster Regarding the Iran-Contra Matter*, William Webster. Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, 1987.

⁴⁵Central Intelligence Agency, *Statement of William H. Webster Regarding the Iran-Contra Matter*.

⁴⁶President’s Special Review Board, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, Edmund Muskie, John Tower, and Brent Snowcroft. 1987, I-1.

⁴⁷President’s Special Review Board, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, B-8.

⁴⁸President’s Special Review Board, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, B-10.

⁴⁹President’s Special Review Board, *Report of the President’s Special Review Board*, B-10.

the Director of Central Intelligence viewed it as a way to maintain the U.S. interest in the containment of communism. As evidenced by history, the plan resulted in a large scandal for the Reagan administration as it revealed the lack of agreement and communication between not only the different branches of the United States Intelligence Community, but also the different branches of government as Congress was left uninformed until the information leak. The Iran-Contra affair revealed how the U.S. would have to decide between pursuing different interests, such as the repulsion of communism or maintaining balance of power, with an Iranian regime that was not openly diplomatic and friendly towards America.

10. Khatami's Dialogue of Civilizations: Iranian Policy into the 90s

The relationship between Iran and the United States entered a period of rapprochement in the late 1990s. With the election of Iranian President Khatami in 1997, Iranian foreign policy towards the United States took on a more diplomatic nature. President Khatami was noted for his popular statement of, "We want to have a dialogue of civilizations."⁵⁰ Despite the fact that Iran had been sanctioned by the United States since the Iranian Revolution, Khatami sought open dialogue with the United States in an attempt to alleviate tensions between the two countries. However, Khatami's proverbial olive branch did not majorly change the outlook of the United States on the region. While Khatami attempted to reopen dialogue with the United States, the U.S. continued to reinforce its Middle Eastern allies.⁵¹ Similar to the isolationist policies in response to the 1979 Revolution, the United States sought to contain the influence of Iran. The containment of Iran intended to ensure that Iran did not disrupt the bal-

ance of power in the region as well as protect U.S. regional interests such as oil.

11. Further Disruption: Bush's Axis of Evil

George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, added vitriol to the rhetoric of the United States towards Iran. During this speech, Bush used the phrase "Axis of evil" to refer to several countries around the globe, Iran included. The main topic of the State of the Union was the recent 9/11 attacks and the efforts of the United States against terrorism. As President Bush described, the "Axis of evil" were states that supported terror groups as well as were threats to America.⁵² Specifically related to Iran, Bush stated, "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom."⁵³ It set Iran, as well as Iraq and North Korea as enemies of the United States and antithetical the American ideal of freedom and peace. In response, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi was quoted by CNN as saying, "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers these remarks as interference in its internal affairs." Interestingly, this calls back to Iranian rejection of foreign influence, specifically American influence, within its internal affairs. Iran viewed Bush's comments as an attack on its sovereignty. Interestingly, there was internal debate within Bush's press team on whether or not to include Iran within the "Axis of evil" as the country and Bush made the final decision to keep the country on the list.⁵⁴ Including Iran in the "Axis of evil" served to instigate further aggression between the two countries as well as hurt

⁵²George Bush, "President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address" (State of the Union Address, Joint Session of Congress, Washington D.C., January 29, 2002).

⁵³George Bush, "President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address."

⁵⁴Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran," *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 3 (2007): 421-40, 423.

⁵⁰Douglas Jehl, "Iranian President Calls for Opening Dialogue with U.S.," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1997, sec. World.

⁵¹"President Khatami Addresses America," *The New York Times*, January 8, 1998, sec. Opinion.

American public opinion of Iran by portraying the country as an aggressor, antithetical to U.S. interests.⁵⁵

In the years following, the “Axis of evil” speech had an impact on the significant cooling of relations between the two countries. Another factor in this cooling was the presidency of Iranian Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative who opposed the United States. Much of Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric was inflammatory towards the United States and sought to goad George W. Bush into public debates. One example of this was Ahmadinejad’s proposed debate against Bush at the United Nations General Assembly meeting. A 2006 CNN article wrote, “Ahmadinejad himself has taken steps to engage the president, sending him a letter earlier this year and, late last month, calling for a “direct television debate” between the leaders.”⁵⁶ Much of Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric also pertained to tensions surrounding the Iranian nuclear program. The United States was growing concerned over the potentiality of a nuclear Iran. In a break from George W. Bush’s policies, the following American presidency of Barack Obama would confront this issue on a diplomatic, multinational effort.

12. Nuclear Talks: The JCPOA

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was agreed upon on July 14, 2015 and was adopted on October 18, 2015.⁵⁷ The JCPOA marked a turn in the United States’ rhetoric towards Iran. A significant shift from the policies of George W. Bush, Obama-era foreign policy that was oriented towards Iran sought renewed cooperation on the public, international stage. The central point of President Barack Obama’s re-

newed Middle East policy was the use of coercive diplomacy to promote the denuclearization of Iran rather than Bush’s use of inflammatory rhetoric towards the country. This effort served to restore the balance of power in the region, as it would be in the U.S.’s interest to restrict the proliferation of nuclear weapons, particularly in Iran. President Barack Obama stated, “Make no mistake: A nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained.”⁵⁸ The JCPOA would allow for a relaxation of economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limitations on their nuclear stockpile and uranium development capabilities.

The JCPOA, in fact, aligned with previous policies that sought to maintain American influence in Iran. As the United States was the main sanctioning force against Iran, the lifting of these sanctions would increase Iranian public approval of the American government.⁵⁹ In addition, the reopening of economic trade between the two nations would be favorable to the United States economy. These economic benefits would increase U.S. influence over Iran, aligning with the overarching U.S. goal of maintaining influence in the country. The JCPOA also allowed for the United States to be a core creator of the conditions under which the Iranian nuclear program would be limited in its scope.⁶⁰ It also placed a great amount of power into the hands of the United Nations Security Council as well as a newly created Joint Commission, removing Iran’s sovereign power over its nuclear program and placing it into the hands of an international body in which the United States was immensely powerful.⁶¹

The JCPOA represents an important point in post-1979 U.S.-Iranian foreign policy. The period

⁵⁵Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, “What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran,” 425.

⁵⁶“No ‘steel-Cage, Grudge Match’ between Bush, Ahmadinejad,” *CNN*, September 7, 2006.

⁵⁷“Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) Archive and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Archive,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed April 20, 2020.

⁵⁸*Obama Warns Iran on Nukes* (United Nations: Associated Press, 2012).

⁵⁹“Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),” July 14, 2015, Iran Sanctions, U.S. Department of State, Main Text, 14.

⁶⁰“Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),” Annex III, 1.

⁶¹“Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),” Annex IV, 1.

following the 1979 Revolution was hallmarked by an outward condemnation of the Iranian government while declassified documents revealed covert relations between the two countries, such as in the Iran-Contra affair. Political sway was maintained, as the Iran-Iraq War demonstrates, primarily through U.S. influence on the balance of power within the region. While this period was overtly aggressive and anti-Iranian, Obama-era policy demonstrates a shift in public rhetoric to realign U.S. policy. While the intended outcome did not change, the JCPOA maintained the policy of influence in the region, the approach was markedly different. This also aligned with Obama's broader foreign policy of multilateral action and withdrawal of troops from the Middle East region.

In a sharp departure from previous presidential policy, Donald Trump dismantled the JCPOA and moved to return to a more outwardly antagonistic relationship with Iran. As President Trump had voiced his opposition to the deal early on in his presidency and in 2018 he fully withdrew the United States from the deal.⁶² While at the time all other parties stated they would remain compliant, the withdrawal of the United States placed stress upon the main appeal of the deal which was the removal of U.S. sanctions from Iran. The president repeatedly referred to the JCPOA as "a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made."⁶³ He opposed the deal, stating that it did not do enough to halt nuclear development and that it ignored the political wrongdoings of Iran.⁶⁴ Opinions in America over the withdrawal from the nuclear deal were mixed, with some agreeing that the deal had been unfavorable to the U.S. while others believing that the deal was integral for the

effective denuclearization of Iran.

13. Relation Deterioration: Trump's Presidency

While relations between Iran and the United States had been deteriorating since the U.S.'s withdrawal from the JCPOA and the growing non-compliance of Iran in reaction, overt military action immediately brought tensions to a head.⁶⁵ The assassination of Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 through a direct order from President Donald Trump caused shock worldwide.⁶⁶ The attack occurred on Iraqi soil, striking the Baghdad International Airport and killing three Iranians and two Iraqi officials.⁶⁷ President Trump rationalized the strike by stating that "Suleimani was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel."⁶⁸ Despite this statement, many American officials as well as Iranian officials doubted the veracity of the reasoning and were unsure that Soleimani had actually been plotting any action against the United States. Deeper analysis into the decision to airstrike Qasem Soleimani is limited due to the confidential nature of relevant documents as well as the lack of information and intelligence that has been made available through public statements.

In reaction to the assassination, tensions immediately escalated between the two countries to a point of near war. Iran reacted with a strike on a U.S. military base in Iraq that did not kill any-

⁶⁵"Iran News: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani Announces Partial Withdrawal from 2015 Nuclear Deal," accessed April 24, 2020.

⁶⁶"Outrage in Iran After Killing of Suleimani: Here's What You Need to Know," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2020, sec. World.

⁶⁷Tom O'Connor and James Laporta, "Trump Orders U.S. Drone Strike Killing Iranian General Who Had 'Plans to Attack' American Diplomats and Military," *Newsweek*, January 2, 2020.

⁶⁸"The Killing of Gen. Qasim Suleimani: What We Know Since the U.S. Airstrike," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2020, sec. World.

⁶²Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018, sec. World.

⁶³Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned."

⁶⁴Rick Gladstone, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal? And Why Does Trump Hate It?," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, sec. World.

one.⁶⁹ These actions only added to the tension that had been growing since Trump took office. As an article from *Al Jazeera* hypothesized that Trump's actions, "weakened reformist forces who favour integration with the world and emboldened political factions who advocate against normalising ties with Western countries."⁷⁰ In addition, Iran immediately announced that it would abandon compliance on one of the main tenets of the JCPOA which was the "limitations in production" of uranium.⁷¹ Rhetoric around the U.S. being an unfair foreign influence in the country also rose yet again as citizens complained that U.S. sanctions and economic coercion had resurged during Trump's presidency to negatively affect Iran.⁷² Adding to this rise in tensions between the two countries was the deployment of 3,000 U.S. troops to the Middle East immediately following the air strike on Soleimani.⁷³ This increased the sentiment that there was a probable impending armed engagement between the two nations.

While there are doubts regarding a recent plot against the United States, actions in Soleimani's past have demonstrated a persistent threat to U.S. interests in Iran and the Middle East. Soleimani had been an adversary of American interests for years in the Middle East. As the head of the Quds Force, Soleimani had facilitated the weaponization of insurgency forces around the region that have been in opposition to U.S. interests.⁷⁴ For example, in 2016 Soleimani had sought to sup-

port Bahraini insurgents which may have endangered the United States Fifth fleet in the country.⁷⁵ However, Soleimani also worked with the United States at times. In the wake of 9/11 Soleimani aided the United States by working alongside the U.S. to combat the Taliban.⁷⁶ That relationship shifted for the worse following George Bush's speech on the "axis of evil."⁷⁷ Throughout Soleimani's time with the Quds Force, he worked to further Iranian interests with some of his actions directly interfering or even harming American interests in the Middle East. During the Iraq war, Soleimani was responsible for many attacks against American forces.⁷⁸ In response to these actions and others, the United States reacted by assigning the Quds Force the classification of a terrorist group.⁷⁹

So, while a strong argument could be made that the airstrike assassination of Qasem Soleimani was antagonistic, short-sighted, and ill-advised, it was not completely out of line with past American action. While this direct strike on Soleimani was certainly the most direct and overt act of aggression between the two countries, it was not without precedent. In cases throughout the history of relations between the two countries, the United States has acted against Iranian leadership when its interests were threatened. However, this action certainly deviates from previous intentions to work diplomatically with Iran, such as in the case of the JCPOA. The outwardly aggressive nature of the airstrike set a new tone for U.S.-Iranian relations. The act maintained the trend American action taken to protect U.S. interests in the region,

⁶⁹Tara Kangarlou, "Despair, Defiance in Iran after US Killing of Qasem Soleimani," *Al Jazeera*, February 4, 2020.

⁷⁰Kangarlou, "Despair, Defiance in Iran after US Killing of Qasem Soleimani."

⁷¹"Outrage in Iran After Killing of Suleimani: Here's What You Need to Know," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2020, sec. World.

⁷²Kangarlou, "Despair, Defiance in Iran after US Killing of Qasem Soleimani," *Al Jazeera*, February 4, 2020.

⁷³Paul Shinkman, "Trump to Send 3,000 More Troops to Middle East Amid Iran Escalation," *US News & World Report*, January 3, 2020.

⁷⁴Thomas Erdbrink, "Iranian General, Denouncing Move by Bahrain, Threatens 'Bloody Intifada,'" *The New York Times*, June 21, 2016, sec. World.

⁷⁵Erdbrink, "Iranian General, Denouncing Move by Bahrain, Threatens 'Bloody Intifada.'"

⁷⁶Aaron Blake, "When the United States and Qasem Soleimani Worked Together," *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2020.

⁷⁷Blake, "When the United States and Qasem Soleimani Worked Together."

⁷⁸"Iran's Qasem Soleimani: Why the US Had Him in Its Sights," *BBC News*, January 3, 2020, sec. Middle East.

⁷⁹"Iran's Qasem Soleimani: Why the US Had Him in Its Sights."

but in a markedly different way than years past.

In regard to the Soleimani airstrike, relations between Iran and the United States may take on a more overtly aggressive direction as we move further into the twenty-first century. If President Donald Trump is reelected, tensions between the two countries may continue to rise. While aggressive rhetoric and covert action is not a new occurrence in the history of U.S.-Iranian relations, the measure to publicly assassinate a high-ranking member of the Iranian government was a large deviation from the past. While the full extent of CIA and Trump policy operation within Iran is not yet known due to its classified nature, the United States, however, will most likely maintain their half a century long trend of pursuance of maintaining influence in the region.

14. Conclusion

While the interests of the United States have changed over the years, the U.S. has consistently tried to maintain their grip in Iran to pursue foreign policy goals. In the 1950s, those goals included favorable oil settlements and the repulsion of communism. With the 1979 Iranian Revolution the U.S.-backed Shah was ousted. This event served as a disruption to the U.S.'s ability to directly influence the Iranian government. However, the U.S. continued to exert influence through contact with the Khomeini regime as well as the use of regional state and non-state actors to apply further pressure on the newly formed government. As the nature of relations shifted, the United States moved to maintain influence through regional disruption in the Iran-Iraq War. Using sanctions and embargoes, the United States was able to apply pressure on Iran economically while George W. Bush's rhetoric did so politically. During the presidency of Barack Obama, this economic pressure was used to sway the Iranian government into signing the JCPOA, pursuing the U.S. interest of nuclear containment in Iran. Finally, throughout the Trump presidency, the influence of the United

States has mainly been exerted through hostile rhetoric and aggressive military and foreign policy action. While there have been differences in action due to changing agendas and opinions of presidents throughout American history, all have consistently worked to maintain U.S. influence in Iran in the pursuit of interest-based foreign policy.

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